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The Impact of Executive Order 9417 on New York City's Jewish Communities Following the Second World War

Shawn Olstein

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Jews lived in small, dense, homogenous communities isolated from the rest of the U.S. population. During the 1930's Jews lived almost exclusively in cities, with Jewish populations in rural areas being nearly nonexistent. While there were only an estimated 4,228,000 Jews living in the U.S. in 1930 representing around 3% of the total U.S. population, they constituted 11.11% of the urban population.¹ New York City was home to the largest Jewish communities in the U.S. and was where many leaders of the Jewish community were located, making it a breeding ground for social change within and outside of the American Jewish communities. Despite living almost exclusively in cities in the first half of the twentieth century, following the Second World War, Jews began to move out into the suburbs, marking a drastic change in how Jewish communities lived. The passage of Executive Order 9417 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt marked a change in the American public's attitude towards Jews, as well as a change in how Jews saw themselves in American society, resulting in New York City's Jewish communities to move out of the city and into the surrounding suburbs following the Second World War.

On January 22, 1944, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt passed Executive Order 9417 which established the War Refugee Board. The executive order was aimed at providing Holocaust relief for Jews fleeing Germany. Despite FDR receiving information in August 1942 describing the Nazi's plan to exterminate up to four million Jews later that fall, the policy enacted aimed at solving the humanitarian crisis was the executive order passed nearly two years later.² There was a great deal of conflict within the Congress as well as the White House on whether or not action should be taken. While many religious groups such as the Bergson group pushed for action, much of the public had a negative view of Jews. Anti-Semitism in the U.S. slowed government action with anti-Semitism peaking domestically in 1944.³ Polarization?

As public knowledge about Nazi atrocities against Jews grew in the U.S., public pressure for government action grew due in part to the agitation of a group of Palestinian Jews lead by Peter Bergson.⁴ The Bergson group first worked to rally support for the formation of an independent Jewish Army under Allied command, however as these efforts yielded poor results, the group changed its focus. The Bergson group then began a mass campaign to spread

¹ H. S. Linfield, "The Jews in the United States," American Jewish Committee, 1929, , accessed November 30, 2018, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1932_1933_7_Statistics.pdf

² "The Bergson Group and the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews of Europe." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed November 30, 2018. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/war-refugee-board-background-and-establishment>.

³ The Effectiveness of the War Refugee Board in Holocaust Relief

⁴ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018. <http://enc.wymaninstitute.org/?p=127>.

awareness of Nazi atrocities. They bought advertisements in newspapers, held public programs, orchestrated mass rallies, and lobbied Congress.⁵ Many U.S. officials within the Roosevelt administration pushed back on a rescue effort claiming it was impossible due to war conditions, and newspapers often buried reports of the killings in the back pages. To further spread the message of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, the Bergson group sponsored a dramatic pageant titled *We Will Never Die*.⁶ Many Hollywood stars were recruited for the project by the Bergson Group. The pageant was performed for more than 40,000 people in two shows at Madison Square Garden in March of 1943, and went on to perform in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington D.C. Many influential figures in the U.S. government saw the performance, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She proceeded to write her next column on the plight of the Jews in Europe and began pushing her husband to act.⁷ Her column was the first time millions of Americans had heard about the Nazi atrocities. In the summer of 1943, the Bergson group formed the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews in Europe.⁸ On October 6, 1943, the Bergson group organized a march on the White House to demand a meeting with the President. Roosevelt snuck out the back entrance of the White House, fearing public embarrassment from meeting with a crowd largely composed of rabbis. Roosevelt's aversion to meeting with Jewish leaders sparked a large amount of anger and distrust in Jewish communities across the nation.⁹

Within Congress and the Executive Branch, the conflict over the Jewish refugees continued to be hashed out. The Roosevelt administration tried to use its influence within the Democratic Party to prevent congress members from introducing legislation. Despite the Roosevelt administration's aversion to refugee policies, several democrats introduced legislation that would aid in the rescue of Jewish refugees. After the administration failed to stop the bill from being introduced, it encouraged Democrat Sol Bloom of New York's 20th district, chairman of the House International Affairs committee, to block the bill. This backfired after the chairman gave misleading testimony on the number of refugees already let in. The chairman's blunder resulted in widespread media coverage, denunciations by members of Congress, and further anger in the Jewish community.¹⁰ This outrage was compounded with new information that revealed how the State Department attempted to obstruct rescue opportunities and block the flow of information pertaining to the Holocaust. Despite growing American anti-Semitism surrounding Jewish refugees, the public was shifting in favor of aiding the refugees as evidenced by a greatly increased number of letters to members of Congress demanding action on the issue.¹¹ With election day coming up, President Roosevelt decided to act on the issue before Congress and passed Executive Order 9417, establishing the War Refugee Board.

Despite this victory few refugees ever came to the United States. The War Refugee Board did help relocate European Jews to shelters outside of dangerous areas, financed Swedish rescue work and helped lobby the Turkish government to allow Jewish refugees to pass through

⁵ Ibid

⁶ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018. <http://enc.wymaninstitute.org/?p=127>.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018..

¹¹ Ibid

on their way to Palestine. Roosevelt only ever admitted 984 Jewish refugees of 36,000 applicants into the country through the War Refugee Board, all of whom were made to undergo a strict application process. These refugees were kept at an internment camp in Oswego, New York originally meant for Japanese citizens.¹² It was decided that the refugees would only be given temporary status and later be moved back to Europe. Once these refugees were allowed in there was a great deal of debate as to whether or not they really counted as U.S. citizens.¹³ With some of the refugees coming to the camp pregnant, there was a large debate within the public on whether or not these children should be considered U.S. citizens. Despite the original intention for the refugees to stay temporary, sympathy for Jews grew among the American public resulting in the refugees being given full citizenship.¹⁴

Prior to World War 2, New York's Jewish communities were highly concentrated and located in specific neighborhoods, with one of the largest being Brighton Beach. During the Great Depression 5,373 Jews migrated to the U.S. in total, most of whom were fleeing Nazi Germany, and many of these migrants settled in Brighton Beach.¹⁵ This influx of Jews fleeing persecution led to a large increase in social activism among the Jewish community of Brighton Beach which can be seen in the headquarters of political parties such as the Communist, Socialist, Mizrahi, Labor, and Zionist parties all being located in the area.¹⁶ Brighton Beach was also home to a large number of supporters of the Bergson group as a result of this increased Jewish activism.¹⁷ With around 1,000,000 Jews living in Brighton Beach and the surrounding county in 1950, the activism of the Bergson group and others was influential in shaping thought within New York Jewish communities. The Jews of Brighton Beach and its county Kings County made up about one fourth of all the Jews in the U.S. and an even larger portion of U.S. Jews lived in the greater New York area.¹⁸ Thus the activist movements within Brighton Beach such as the Jewish refugee movements were on the minds of a significant portion of the Jewish community, and a majority of New York Jews.

¹² Daniels, Roger. "Changes in Immigration Law and Nativism since 1924." *The John Hopkins University Press* 76 (December 1989).; Levy, Albert G.D. "Acquisition of Nationality in the Emergency Refugee Shelter." *The American Journal of International Law* 39 (January 1945).

¹³ Levy, Albert G.D. "Acquisition of Nationality in the Emergency Refugee Shelter." *The American Journal of International Law* 39 (January 1945).

¹⁴ Daniels, Roger. "Changes in Immigration Law and Nativism since 1924." *The John Hopkins University Press* 76 (December 1989). https://www.jstor.org/stable/23883333?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents.

¹⁵ H. S. Linfield, "The Jews in the United States," American Jewish Committee, 1929, , accessed November 30, 2018, http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1932_1933_7_Statistics.pdf

¹⁶ Brooklyn College. "Brooklyn Jews." Macaulay. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/napoli13/brooklyn-jews/#WWII>.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ "U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010." US Religion Census. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.usreligioncensus.org/compare.php>

For the first half of the Twentieth Century, Jews suffered from extreme antisemitism, which restricted where they could live, and caused Jews to cluster in specific neighborhoods to escape persecution. In 1930 the Jewish population of King's County was around 900,000 with the total population of the county being 2,560,401.¹⁹ While Jews made up a significant portion of the population in Kings County, they lived close together in specific neighborhoods such as Brighton Beach, Borough Park, and Williamsburg.²⁰ Jews in these communities only interacted with other Jews, and almost never married outside of the Jewish community as it was seen as improper for a non-Jew to marry a Jew or vice versa.²¹ The marriage practices within New York's Jewish communities were thus constructed out of both a Jewish desire to only marry other Jews and a larger American rejection of intermarriage. These marriage practices further segregated Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Jews could buy groceries, shop, and operate their businesses within the community without ever having to interact with Americans outside specific neighborhoods. Being rejected from the general population and social stigma against marrying Jews caused Jews to flee into densely Jewish neighborhoods which only further exacerbated social segregation.²² However, this segregation was not solely dictated by social stigma and ethnic congregation. Before 1948, when the Supreme Court stopped the Federal Housing Authority from providing loans based on race, the FHA would prevent certain deeds from being sold to people of certain races, largely African Americans and Jews.²³ For most of its history before the 1948 Supreme Court ruling, the Federal Housing Authority openly stated its belief in racial segregation, justified by eugenics and scientific racism.²⁴ By trying to enforce racial segregation, the FHA would restrict where Jews could live based on what loans were given and what deeds were open to Jews for purchase.²⁵ Thus, the dense Jewish neighborhoods of New York in King's County, were in part created by antisemitism and discrimination within bureaucracies like the Federal Housing Authority. The combination of de facto segregation as well as de jure segregation enforced by the FHA resulted in the formation of the Jewish communities of New York, and it would take the breaking down of these combined forces to push the Jewish diaspora to the suburbs.

The passage of Executive Order 9417 marked a change in American attitudes towards Jews which in turn broke down the institutions keeping them within small New York City Jewish communities. While American antisemitism peaked in 1944, this antisemitism was part of a backlash to the Bergson Group and their refugee movements throughout the course of the Second

¹⁹ "US Demography 1790 to Present." Social Explorer. Accessed November 30, 2018.
<https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

²⁰ "U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010." US Religion Census. Accessed October 12, 2018.
<http://www.usreligioncensus.org/compare.php>.

²¹ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018.
<http://enc.wymaninstitute.org/?p=127>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sacks, Karen Brodtkin. "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" 78-99.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

World War. A poll conducted by psychologist Gordon Allport found that in 1944 10% of the population was “rabidly anti-Semitic” with another 45% “mildly so.”²⁶ This came after years of growth in the Ku Klux Klan which stoked Jewish fears about the America outside their communities.²⁷ However despite the growth of antisemitism during this period, the first major successful Jewish protest movement, the Bergson Group as previously described, marked a turning point for Jews in America. The awareness of the Jewish plight in Europe played a significant role in reducing antisemitism. Thus, it is no surprise that after the passage of Executive Order 9417 in 1944 and it was clear that the momentum of public opinion was in favor of the Jewish community, antisemitism steadily began to decline.²⁸ The power of Jewish activism had been proven with the successful push for refugee reform. This led to further successful Jewish protest movements such as those for prohibitions of ethnic based employment and housing in New Jersey and New York in 1945.²⁹ The success of these movements made Jews feel safer and more accepted in society. By 1945 55% of Jews in New York reported feeling “very safe” outside their neighborhood compared to 35% who reported the same a year prior.³⁰ In the course of only a few years, the major barriers keeping New York Jews in the city began to collapse. With housing and employment barriers taken down in New Jersey and New York, it became much easier for Jews to move out into the suburbs and find employment there. As Jewish activism proved effective Jews began to feel more accepted into American society and no longer needed to stay in dense Jewish neighborhoods in New York City to stay safe and be accepted. While this is not to imply antisemitism was eliminated, Jews still faced social stigma with 29% of the country holding “anti-Semitic views” in 1964, the barriers that had been keeping Jews isolated broke enough to promote social mobility.³¹ With the nation beginning to change New York Jews such as those from King’s County began to move out into the suburbs.

Following the passage of Executive Order 9417 Jews began to move out of New York City and into the surrounding suburban counties in New York and New Jersey. Nassau county, a suburban county on Long Island had a nearly nonexistent Jewish population prior to 1944. However over the next few years, the county’s Jewish population began to steadily grow and was nearly 4% Jewish by 1980.³² Other New York counties such as Orange and Rockland counties saw similar population changes, going from a nonexistent Jewish population to 1% and 2.37% of

²⁶ Dinnerstein, Leonard. "Anti-Semitism Exposed and Attacked, 1945–1950." *American Jewish History* 71, no. 1 (1981): 134-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23882008>.

²⁷ "Anti Semitism in the United States." CQ Press Library. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresre1941111400>

²⁸ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018. <http://enc.wymaninstitute.org/?p=127>.

²⁹ Dinnerstein, Leonard. "Anti-Semitism Exposed and Attacked, 1945–1950." *American Jewish History* 71, no. 1 (1981): 134-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23882008>.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Foxman, Abraham. "Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. October 1, 2003.

³² "US Demography 1790 to Present." Social Explorer. Accessed November 30, 2018. <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

the counties being Jewish in 1980 respectively.³³ Across the Hudson river in New Jersey, Essex, Union, Monmouth, and Middlesex counties all saw their Jewish populations increase to about 1% of the total population by 1980.³⁴ While it may seem that the still small population of Jews in each of the previously mentioned counties seems like an insignificant change, it is important to understand that New York Jews moved to hundreds of different suburban counties, making their populations disperse. The true impact of New York's Jewish flight is reflected in the population changes of individual Jewish communities in New York. While there are still significant Jewish communities in Borough Park, areas that used to have strong Jewish majorities like Coney Island and Brighton Beach, now have almost no Jewish communities.³⁵ These communities are not hidden in increased population stats, instead they declined as a direct result of migration out to the suburbs. Most Jewish families of the surrounding New York City counties can all trace their family line back to the Jewish communities of New York City.³⁶ This suburbanization of the Jewish population could only occur if barriers holding Jews in the city were weakened, as they were following the passage of Executive Order 9417.

The War Refugee Board established by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Executive Order 9417 caused a change in American attitude towards Jews which in turn caused a migration of New York City's Jewish population out into the suburbs. While the War Refugee Board brought in very few actual refugees, the activism within the Jewish communities by Jewish organizations such as the Bergson Group changed Jewish perception about their place in America and American attitudes towards Jews. These changing attitudes, along with successful Jewish activism broke down the legal and social barriers keeping Jews isolated in communities within New York City. As these barriers collapsed, Jewish communities migrated to the suburbs in the second half of the twentieth century. While many other factors contributed to Jewish suburbanization such as the Federal-Aid Highway Act by making travel in and out of New York city easier, there is no denying the significant impact President Roosevelt's executive order had on Jewish suburbanization.

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³³Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ "Bergson Group." Encyclopedia. December 28, 2014. Accessed November 30, 2018.
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³⁶ Ibid

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